

H. Maes-Jelinek. "Wilson Harris." In *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*. Edited by J. C. Hawley. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001. 225-229.

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Wilson Harris (1921–) Wilson Harris, poet, novelist, and critic of mixed European, Amerindian, and African descent, was born in Guyana, where he worked as a government surveyor until he emigrated to England in 1959. The many expeditions that he led into the Guyanese interior considerably influenced his perception of landscape as a living, never passive environment, permeated with the silent, ghostly presence of vanished Amerindian peoples—hence, his

obsessive attempt in both fiction and criticism to retrieve a subterranean native tradition as a counterpoint to Western culture, in a possible harmony free of binary opposition between conqueror and conquered, Christian and pagan. He thus detects strange affinities between Renaissance Europe and the pre-Columbian Americas, representations or cultures that are *partial* masks of a "universal unconscious." This is the source of his postcolonial philosophy and cross-culturalism, which he sharply distinguishes from multiculturalism, in his view an umbrella term covering a surface mosaic of cultures tolerant of each other but still distinct and self-sufficient. In *Explorations* (1981), *The Womb of Space. The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (1983), *The Radical Imagination* (1992), and *Selected Essays*. In *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination* (1999), Harris has commented extensively on cross-culturalism as a multilayered concept implying a mutuality between different cultures but also between dominating peoples or individuals and "still or silent eclipsed voices" outside and within the self. This explains his view of the human personality as a cluster of inner selves, "the crew every man mans and lives in his inmost ship and theatre and mind" (*Palace of the Peacock*, 1960, 1998, 44).

All of Harris' novels are expeditions into outer and inner landscape, the "womb of space," physical territory, boundless metaphor, and psychical ground of exploration where the brutal legacy of past and recent history (as in *Jonestown*, 1996) is confronted and transformed into a possible source of rebirth. Indeed, the very fragmentation of self and community, central to the Caribbean experience, its catastrophic events and traumas mutate in his fiction into gateways toward the reconstruction of the self, though never finally achieved: "[A] balance exists between wreckage and unfinished genesis, between loss and gain, between dismemberment and re-memberment" (*Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, 1993, 134). Harris' first book of essays (*Tradition, the Writer and Society*, 1967), in which he anticipates by some twenty-five years **Edward Said's** correlation between the rise of the novel in Europe and the growth of imperialism, initiates his lifelong exploration of the nature of fiction, of creativity, above all, of imagination as the major agent of transformation and renewal in a world beset by conflicts of power and moral crises. Already in *Palace of the Peacock*, an allegorical reconstruction of the New World conquest and original search for El Dorado, the conqueror's reconciliation with the Amerindian people, symbolized by an Arawak virgin and Christ, is essentially a figment of the imagination as the conqueror's vision shatters before being refashioned. As a dream emerging from the narrator's unconscious, it dismantles the Western, self-assured sense of being in favor of a fluid ontology, simultaneously breaking down all aspects of realism, which, in the author's view, reproduces a recognizable picture of society but neglects buried layers of partial existences within the self, what he calls "the cross-cultural psyche." Harris' conviction that all structures and images are partial and that wholeness (different from totality) is inaccessible to people also accounts for his anticolonialism and repudiation of any absolute, his objection to any consolidation whether of identity or power.

Harris began by writing poetry (*Fetish*, 1951; *Eternity to Season*, 1954) until he found his appropriate form with *The Guyana Quartet* (*Palace of the Peacock* 1960; *The Far Journey of Oudin*, 1961; *The Whole Armour*, 1962; *The Secret Ladder*, 1963). It offers a composite picture of Guyana and indirectly evokes the historical legacy that generated its heterogeneous population: slavery, East Indian indentureship, the flight of Amerindians into the jungle, then of runaway slaves and the impact of their descendants' retrieval from oblivion on the modern Guyanese consciousness. In *Heartland* (1964), the protagonist's lonely journey and disappearance into the interior epitomize the unfinished quest and "drama of consciousness" that erode the individual's certainties and rigid sense of self prior to his acceptance of responsibility for personal and community relations. In the next cycle of novels (*The Eye of the Scarecrow*, 1965; *The Waiting Room*, 1967; *Tumatumari*, 1968; *Ascent to Omai*, 1970), each protagonist experiences a state of loss and psychological void from which she or he emerges through the dual (re)creation of a self freed from former prejudices and of a fiction (for Harris, "living text" and reality) that "consumes its own biases."

Myth also plays a major part in bringing to light the regenerative capacity of catastrophe and is a way of coming to terms with the irrational forces that people tend to ignore at their cost. In his collections of stories, *The Sleepers of Roraima* (1970) and *The Age of the Rainmakers* (1971), Harris reinterprets Amerindian myths and legends. "Yurokon," in particular, is a further exploration of cross-culturalism through the bone-flute metaphor (also used in *Jonestown*), the instruments carved by the Caribs from their cannibalized Spanish enemies to penetrate their mind and intuit their intentions. The Caribs saw in the bone-flute the very origins of music. Since destruction (cannibalism) and creation (music) come together in the instrument, Harris expresses through this metaphor his conviction that "adversarial contexts" (the encounter of inimical cultures) can generate creativity. Subsequent novels further modulate his approach to creativeness and, for the first time, take place mainly in the United Kingdom, though they also bridge continents, like *The Angel at the Gate* (1982), located both in London and in India. *Black Marsden* (1972) is set in Edinburgh, where Clive Goodrich comes upon Black Marsden and brings him to his house together with his agents, characters in their own right but also part of Goodrich's tabula rasa inner theater, who threaten to impinge on his freedom of judgment and show that the deprived "other" can become possessive in turn. Goodrich and Marsden reappear in *Companions of the Day and Night* (1975), set in Mexico, which initiates what Harris called "the novel as painting" developed from "convertible images" (protean metaphors), particularly substantialized in *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1977) and *The Tree of the Sun* (1978). In these two novels DaSilva, reborn from death in *Palace of the Peacock* and *Heartland*, is a painter engaged in a profound "re-vision" of the experiences evoked on his canvases. In these and his later fictions Harris elicits correspondences between various forms of art, writing, music, painting, and sculpture as well as between art and science, particularly quantum physics with its assumption of "simulta-

neous possibilities," parallel universes, and relativization of categories of being. In *Genesis of the Clowns* (1977), published in the same volume as *Da Silva da Silva*, a government surveyor remembers the expeditions he led thirty years before in Guyana and realizes that the sun of empire under which he exploited his crew is being decentered, setting in motion a "Copernican revolution of sentiment" in a globe immobilized in the days of empire and stimulating the rebirth (genesis) of the crew, whose deeper feelings are at last acknowledged.

From the *Da Silva* novels onward Harris' metaphorical writing increasingly blends with metaphysical, abstract reflection on the nature of creativity without relinquishing the sensuousness characteristic of all his fiction. *The Carnival Trilogy* (*Carnival*, 1985; *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 1987; *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, 1990) is an ambitious project that rewrites canonical European grand narratives and myths, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Odyssey*, and *Faust*, suggesting that, however admirable, the absoluteness of the ideal worldview that they present has become obsolete and may endanger the future of humanity. They also offer revised conceptions of comedy, allegory, and epic as well as an impressive sample of the Old World–New World symbiosis that informs Harris's cross-culturalism. Throughout his fiction, the carnival metaphor stands, among other things, for endless creativity, the emergence into being under different, partial masks of the formerly eclipsed, whose residues and legacies of experience have accumulated into an "unattainable wholeness" and are transformed into the sacred. In *Carnival* the protagonist, guided by Everyman Masters, explores the colonial inferno of New Forest (a barely disguised Guyana) but also, like Dante, the possibilities of rebirth. However, he does not move toward the eternal but discovers that the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso are fluid, overlapping states in the endlessly changing, self-renewing existential process. This endless evolution, involving backward and forward movements, as in *Heartland*, is further elaborated in *The Infinite Rehearsal*, a phrase that sums up the creative process, "the unfinished genesis of the imagination," the instrument of renewal itself in need of regeneration. It also describes the protagonist's ceaseless "re-vision" of the past from different angles and with a growing consciousness in his quest for value or, as he puts it, for the "original nature of value and spirit" (vii). The shifts between past, present, and future announce a similar approach to time, inspired by the Maya, in *The Four Banks of the River of Space* and, above all, *Jonestown*, both novels weaving a cross-cultural bridge between a pre-Columbian and a modern scientific perception of the universe. Metamorphosed Homeric figures have peopled Harris' writing from his earliest works, and *The Odyssey* is a palimpsest to many of his novels as a frequent source of revisionary myths and metaphors. *Four Banks* "re-writes" *The Odyssey* with English and Guyanese characters, but Ulysses is "fragmented" into a number of actors who share the burden of his strong personality and become partial selves susceptible of compassion and forgiveness, in contradistinction to the original hero's terrible nemesis, a motivation redeemed here, as in *Jonestown*, by imaginative insight.

The Resurrection runs as a major theme through Harris' work and takes on

many forms: it can be the paradoxical presence of life in death, the emergence in the characters' consciousness of a previously ignored individual or historical past, and the reappearance of characters who died in earlier narratives. In *Resurrection at Sorrow Hill*, it takes the form of a schizophrenic, but regenerating, impersonation of figures like Montezuma, DaVinci, and Socrates by the inmates of an asylum. Harris adheres to Michael Gilke's concept of "creative schizophrenia" in the Caribbean, postulating that self-dividedness can offer an opportunity to break up a static condition (here blocked psyche) before a therapeutic reconstitution. Through their split personality, the "clowns of Sorrow Hill" (the novel is partly a sequence to *Genesis of the Clowns*) illustrate the doubling in characterization frequent in Harris' fiction and show the need to conciliate the variegated parts of their cultural inheritance both in themselves and in a place dense with the psychological vestiges of conquest. Like Sorrow Hill, Jonestown, the location of Harris' latest novel, is an actual marginal place evoking a victimized humanity, here the massacre ordered by a charismatic cult leader, Jim Jones, of about 1,000 followers, an extermination paralleled with the unexplained disappearance of Amerindian peoples and with contemporary holocausts and genocides. Like earlier Harrisian protagonists, its sole survivor, Francisco Bone, writes a "dream book" "edited" by W. H., whose narrative shifts between past, present, and future in the course of the redemptive journey that he undertakes to bring to light motivations and responsibilities and validate his conviction that "the heart of the wild is susceptible to change" (215). With the possible exception of Donne in *Palace of the Peacock*, Bone, who wishes to "open up a human-centred cosmos," travels farthest of all Harris' characters into mythopoeic and archetypal dimensions. One of Harris' most original contributions to the novel form is to have relativized humans' place in the universe, extending their personality to the extrahuman (including the animal and the divine) and traveling into inner/outer space that reaches from the deepest recesses of the psyche to cosmic heights, blending many cultures past and present. His narratives evince an extraordinary intertextuality. They have also freed language from conventional structures and patterns through the blending of various categories of being, startling orchestrations of images, composite and paradoxical metaphors.

Further Reading: H. Maes-Jelinek 1991, 2000.

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